

# The Intoxicating and Destructive Powers of Beings: A Study of Igbo Epic, *Anukili Ugama* by Rems Umeasiegbu

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**Abstract**— *Beings, in this context, depict epic heroes who are strange creatures in the form of humans but of different constitution and structures. In Epics, the heroes are supernatural beings who possess extra-ordinary powers and are destined to utilize such powers in salvaging their race. But most surprisingly, such beings at some point tend to abuse the use of such powers in the opposing direction thereby conforming to the notion that excess power truly intoxicates. The Epic as Abrams (81) defines it 'is a long verse narrative on a serious and elevative style and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depend the fate of a tribe, a nation or the human race'. In Africa, there are equally long narratives recounting the deeds of legendary heroes with human traits and supernatural attributes like Shaka of Zulu and Sundiata of Mali. In this essay, the researcher explores the Igbo epic, Anukili Ugama, whose hero, Anukili, equally exhibits the traits of other heroes of epic, and of which such power at some point in time of its intoxication, destroys those who it was meant to protect. This study aims to have an appraisal of the enormous power which intoxicates and backfires to the detriment of the race which is meant to be saved. It x-rays how a human being may act for or against his fellow and the problem of man's destiny. It therefore calls for a re-appraisal of such vice and for caution in dealing with such beings wherever they might be found. It will be explored from the sociological /historical points of view.*

**Keywords**— *Igbo Epic, Anukili Ugama, Rems Umeasiegbu, constitution.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature as a social fact of the society, involves peoples life and the community in which they live. African heroic epics are concerned with social and cultural functions and represent one of the most comprehensive surveys of African customs and values. These multi-generic narratives provide keen insight into the moral systems of African societies and

reflect the richness and complexity of their cultures. According to Rummell (2002), epics are cultural monuments because they preserve and celebrate cultural values and customs, and they serve to unify the listening communities by reminding them of the values of their cultures. Biebuyck (1978) emphasizes that the epics create in the listener's mind a sense of belonging, a feeling of greatness and pride. They gather the community and tell stories while nourishing and honoring cultural values and behaviors. Such is seen in the Igbo tribe of the Nigerian epic in Africa. The difference of the Igbo Epic- *Anukili Ugama* is that major epics are in the genre of poetry but this piece under study is in a prose form. The historical undertone was got from a long narrative, in folktale prototype, where the raconteur, Nwabunwanne, narrates the story of this heroic Igbo epic, from Aguleri in Anambra State Nigeria. According to the author, *Anukili Ugama* is a heroic epic that recounts in a coherent manner, the deeds of a legendary hero with supernatural traits and with supernatural attributes that are set against a background of extraordinary events within the framework of a certain time span and a certain stretch of space (7-8). Although he affirms strongly that the story qualifies for a heroic epic, the historical undertone is so prominent that it cannot be ignored.

## II. HISTORICAL / SOCIOLOGICAL UNDERTONE

The exploration of the traditional Igbo narratives that circulated in the preliterate age has a rich representation in Rems Umeasiegbu's ground breaking translation of the Igbo epic *Anukili Ugama* (1983). In this translation, the laws that govern the ways of the Igbo narrative epics and oral traditions are aptly portrayed as a system kept in the human memory and transmitted orally from generation to generation. The historical sequel of the Igbo narratives are also explored as an easy asset to further unravel the riddle

of how the local bard or raconteurs recite and perform the epics in a contemporary Igbo community.

Durosimi et al (1992) say that literature is the sum total of history and culture and epic is part and parcel of the field of literature. The relevance of epics to society cannot leave out history. History involves society in that the former deals into past events of man in the world around him. In order words, history is about society and is directed to society. Yarshaster (1988) converges with the point that epics embody the value of people, history and ideals and can formulate people's culture and spiritual heritage. The protagonists in epics are often times historical figures and the idea that epic is a vehicle of history can be justified. Anukili is a historical hero in the history of Aguleri of Anambra State, Nigeria. War and history are two meeting elements because many history subjects include tribal or civil wars, regional or world war.

According to the author, the hero, Anukili Ugama really lived. The raconteur, Mr. Bernard Nwabunwanne affirms that the story of Anukili is not an "Ita" (a fictitious story). He states;

'Every citizen of Aguleri knows the story of Anukili. The story is an old one. It is also a true story. It is not a folktale. Anukili was a real person. He was born in Aguleri (Prologue 27).

His introduction of his own person affirms his originality. He introduces himself so vividly; 'I am Bernard Chukwudi Nwabunwanne . I come from Enyinyi's lineage; what this means is that I came into the world with Enyinyi blood. My agnates are today called Umuenyinyi. The Enyinyi I am talking about is the one that served as Anukili's confidant and medicine man, the Enyinyi that accompanied Anukili Ugama to battlefields. Whenever Anukili fought a war, Enyinyi was there to lend a hand. He was one of the Aguleri's citizens that saw battle with Anukili' (27).

The above affirmations show the authenticity of the historical traits of the epic which emphasize the reality of the story as something that actually happened. Whether there are certain exaggerations and modifications as synonymous with certain oratures, we should accommodate them, as the author emphasizes.

On the sociological attributes of this epic, it is properly attributed taking into considerations that literature cannot be separated from the society that nurtures it. Sociologically, this epic explores peoples' life experiences in Aguleri community and its environment. Therefore the historical and sociological approaches to the study of the Igbo epic are most appropriate. The epic is said to be situated between history and the myth because it attributes the entire cultural experience of a society to one character who has made a

mark on his time and derives all values of that society from himself. That is typical of *Anukili Ugama*.

### III. SUPERNATURAL BELIEF

The belief in the supernatural is what gives the African epic its heroic proportion. The use of the supernatural as a means to cope with man's original weakness constitutes a belief system that is still widely held today in many African societies. The existence of the marvelous and the recourse to supernatural means by the hero symbolize his consciousness about his own weakness and limitations as a human being and his desire to transcend them. The supernatural serves as a part in the dramatic structure of the epic.

The much emphasis on the supernatural dispositions are not endorsed by some writers. Bowra for instance strongly believes that the supernatural is "unheroic and distasteful" (p 93) and in his opinion, oral epics that put too much stress on the supernatural powers of the hero cannot be defined as heroic epics because, instead of exalting the human qualities and gifts of the hero, they rather dwell on his extraordinary non-human capacities. Those epics do not define true heroism by showing the hero's genuine human abilities but by applauding his non-human exploits. The supernatural as an analyzable structural device and the intoxicating and destructive powers of the beings in the forms of the epic hero has not been extensively investigated in the scholarship of the genre. It is therefore needful that more attention be devoted to the study of the hero's supernatural powers and their impacts on the heroic tale as a whole.

The choice of the Igbo epic *Anukili Ugama* bothers on the background of the researcher, coupled with the fact that little or nothing has been said on that Igbo epic. Worthy of note is that as it relates to the hero, Anukili, so does it affect individuals with excessive powers who wield their powers and eventually over steps their bounds at little provocation. It equally calls for caution on the people who have any such hero. They ought to be wary. This article is an attempt to demonstrate that the supernatural heroes are beings who wield strange powers, and whose powers intoxicate and bring to destruction of both the race they are meant to salvage and upon them. The attitude of Anukili in his military exploits and brutality is in the negative. He is said to be an embodiment of strange features and structures. According to the author:

Anukili was erratic. He was a study in ugliness. He was huge and tall. His skin was tough and coarse. His stomach was a big water pot. His face was dotted with

scars. His eyes were bloodshot. His lips were as thick as the bark of a tree. His teeth resembled elephant tusks (8).

Although stated in numberings, he continues that he was a terror to behold and that he had some weird traits which include the following:

Anukili was born with upper and lower teeth.

He came into the world legs first

He came into the world clutching roots and herbs in both hands.

He could not cry until he was seven years old. Even then, he could not cry more than thrice daily (at midnight, in the morning and in the evening).

Whenever he cried, animals took to their heels.

He became leader without any formal training.

His weapons were a tree stump, a bow and some arrows and a big stick with thorns at the head.

Anukili could finish the food meant for thirty men.

Anything he touched came crashing to the ground (9).

The fact that he embodies all those extra-ordinary attributes and strength should have made him know that he came for a divine assignment, but instead he is said to have known about his frightening physique and unnatural strength, and he capitalized on that to be swollen-headed, as he boasts that none could challenge him because he is not the person that could be killed by man.

The story has it that he saves his people and those in their neighboring towns from invaders and slave drivers. At the same time, he threatens, beats and terrorizes his own people.

The very qualities that made him a terror to all, those qualities that made him a hero in Aguleri and its environment were also responsible for his ultimate destruction. His actions and utterances ran contrary to the values and aspirations of his people.

For them to survive as a people, they had to destroy him (10).

The fact that the same hand that pets equally hits, makes uncanny the whole situation. Excess power really intoxicates and eventually destroys as seen in Anukili's dispositions. Femi Euba, in *The Gulf* equally emphasizes the same intoxicating and destructive powers in the character of Ogun who was invited by the people of Ire to come and fight for them against their enemies. A supernatural being whose slightest provocation turns to the opposing intention; Ogun does the opposite of what he was called to do by killing his own as Anukili reigns terror to his own people of Eziagulu in Aguleri. According to Baba in Euba's *The Gulf*:

Two hundred men had already been rounded up and taken to the fort, chained, dragged, beaten.... It was a lucky day for the slavers. And the people of the village of Ire knew that was not the end of it; that the baboon, if not checked in time, would come back to fodder some more. And on whose neck might his chain of insults fall this time? They would not wait for this. Ogun therefore was approached for help, and he rose. The mighty lion of the battle ground rose, and summoned up all his forces! And along with the able men of Ire village making up the rear, he moved toward the fort. This would be a battle long to be remembered, a battle the whole wide world should celebrate! Ogun let me be with you today! Let me fight side by side, blood with blood by your will, that I may relate or be related by, to future men! He meant to penetrate the bushes and crush with his mighty feet any offending offal of a man gaming for man, to strike a deadly victory on all slavers, masters and caboccers alike. This must be a battle that should end all battles! Ogun, let me be with you today. [Sounds of guns and canons rise and fall in the background]... Ogun have mercy, it's your men you slaughter!' On and on the bulldozer raged and roared, tearing apart, matcheting, uprooting, toppling and crushing every living thing in sight, man or beast, friend or foe, slavers and slaves alike. Or so it seemed at dawn as he beheld his night's handiwork, the last strands of wine-dew lifting from his eyes. There he stood, dumbfounded, confounded, and emotion-empty tank, cold stare goggling out of his metallic forehead!.. Why, Elegbara, why? Will and fate, why? And when did the slave-boat creep away unnoticed?

The same applies for the people of Eziagulu who became afraid at Anukili's torture. The difference is that Ogun was drunk before he does the abomination but Anukili was sober. At his thirtieth birthday, he began to display his valor. It was recorded that no quantity of water could satisfy him, and so he snatched women's water pots and breaks them with one finger to destabilize them. Naturally, fear gripped the entire villagers and a lot of people died because of his brutality. The voice of the people they say is the voice of God; and so the people, despite his other salvific missions determine to take his life. Such was seen in the epic hero, Shaka the great of Zulu, whose death was equally planned by his two brothers, Dingane and Mhlangana in collaboration with his paternal aunt. Such deaths of these beings are a confirmation of their intoxicating powers which they wielded negatively to attract destructions from their people.

#### IV. BIRTH OF EPIC HEROES

Homer holds the protagonists of the epic as larger-than-life men who are capable of great deeds of strength and courage and whose births are shrouded in the mythical mysteries beyond human conception. In most cases, epic heroes experience exceptional birth of ten times preceded by prophecies. Their childhood is difficult and their youth as well. According to Ogundule (1992), epic heroes are rejected children and angry youths. Wars and sometimes, fights against dragons, monsters, crocodiles (as in Anukili's case) is another feature for epic heroes. Special growth, invulnerability and super human powers are other characteristics in this connection. They are special and different from other stories protagonists. For some heroic heroes, exile is another important feature. At this point, heroes leave their fatherland together with their rejected mothers. Later, they return to claim their rights, inheritance specifically. They are extraordinary figures whose exploits are highly ranked as they are driven by destiny that they cannot control themselves. Sundiata and Shaka fit most of these characteristics and maybe comparable in many ways to Anukili, who becomes enshrined in the tales of his miraculous conception, birth and early childhood which inserts a mystical aspect to his heroic tale. His father rejects him out rightly due to the circumstances surrounding his birth.

The man became uncontrollably angry. He said it was an abomination in Aguleri for a woman to give birth to a baby with "teeth". Other abnormalities are that he came into the world legs first, and that he is clutching herbs and roots in both hands". "These are abominable deeds. I shall not have such a baby. He thought of possible solutions- throw the baby away or kill it. The second alternative he accepted. He would kill the baby on the fourth day (30).

#### V. EPIC HERO IN THE TIME OF KAIROS

"Kairos" is a Greek word which means "the fullness of time" or "the propitious moment for the performance of an action"; in other words, the epic hero always has the intuitive grasp of knowing exactly when to act and he exits at a crucial point in the history of his locality when his services were dearly needed. The traditional pre-Christian Igbo communities consists of some harsh and warlike tribes in which bold and courageous action was required from heroes like *Anukili* who existed in a time of great trouble and strife, when history was in its early stages and society was just beginning to develop. His amazing physical exploits answer the call of the time for blatant expression of

bravery and heroism in the face of hostile neighbors full of evil and chaos. The story of Anukili reflects to a great extent the cultural need of the pre-modern Igbo societies. The *Anukili Ugama epic* embodies, then, the culture, the religious and mythical beliefs, the psychology, and certainly the art of the Igbo life of that era. It was a time of great uncertainty, great fear, and yet the story reflects the hope, such as it was, that the Igbo, must have, when enduring such dark and difficult times. Anukili slays the Hippopotamus and leads men in wars against the enemies of his people- the "ada". He becomes a larger-than-life hero performing magnificent feats in battling evil foes which threaten the community. Anukili is still a character in transition from pagan to Christian beliefs. This struggle between paganism and Christianity is seen in the passage in which Anukili made reference to the Christian God. That was seen when his sight was regained after getting blinded with the owl's droppings. The herbs used by his friend and companion, Enyinyi really worked and Anukili joyfully shouted in ecstasy that Enyinyi was a man of God. The author recorded thus:

Anukili, it would be recalled, did not believe in God; he did not believe in the existence of God. Nor did he believe that there was another breathing creature except him (Anukili). But from now on he believed in the existence of God. It was this problem of the owl's droppings that brought the realization to him. That was the very first day Anukili mentioned the name of God (59).

#### VI. EPIC BOASTING

Another device that enhances the epic tradition in the *Anukili Ugama* narrative is the abundant use of epic boastings by the hero. This introduces another characteristic of the epic hero. He is often a hot headed fool who occasionally needs to be knocked down a peg or two. Anukili was big, bold and boastful. When Aguleri was invaded by slave traders he went into fury and in a spate of epic boasting he asked:

Was the enslavement carried out by man? Or by an animal...a man created by God? He then told them not to worry that if the atrocity was committed by man, he was going to capture the criminal (50)

Again, when a hippopotamus harassed the people of Aguleri in their stream, Anukili's boasting took the upper side in him. He asked his people 'Are you sure it is a hippopotamus... the 'tiny' hippopotamus? ....Wait! You will show me the place where this hippopotamus lurks for its victims. I want to see things for myself (53).

In his explanatory notes, Umeasiegbu threw more light on the hero's epic boastings:

It is not that Anukili did not believe in the existence of a supreme being – by whatever name. Rather, the problem is that in his euphoria and arrogance, he had arrogated to himself that powers ordinarily attributed to the supreme being and ancestors. (77)

### VII. THE TRAGIC END

As a result of the tortures the Eziagulu community has experienced in the hands of their son, whose excessive powers have intoxicated unto threatening and humiliating his own people, they decided that Anukili was too much for them and so vowed to kill him. Some of the ugly experiences include the fact that in a bid to escape Anukili's terrorism, they run off in the night across the Omabala. Incidentally, when they were discovered by the hero, they also run back across the Omabala River once more, to continue enduring his maltreatments. An impression is created of a near nomadic existence which was the nature of the pre-literate society. The determination of the people to kill Anukili was unabated as they planned another trick to terminate his life, immediately after the first plan to kill him failed. When he eventually died out of burning fire on his head, planted by his people; they became happy. The people of Eziagulu, meanwhile, were in ecstasy. 'They could not believe their eyes. So Anukili was not indestructible after all? They wondered'(71).

### VIII. CONCLUSION

The *Anukili Ugama* epic paints a portrait of a larger-than-life epic hero whose character and exploits embody the highest ideals and values of the pagan culture he represents. The Igbo traditional society of more than two thousand years ago consisted of harsh and dangerous clans in which bold and courageous action was required from heroes, like Anukili who lived in a time of great trouble and strife, when history was in its early stages and the Igbo society was just beginning to develop. But his amazing physical exploits which was meant to answer the call of the time for blatant expression of bravery and goodness in the face of the forces of darkness, evil and chaos, was not fully utilised as it ought to be; instead, pride and arrogance take their toll on him and that ultimate power that intoxicates, beclouds his reasons and visions and thus summons his destruction by the same clan who ought to shield him. The story of Anukili reflects the cultural needs of a society during the premodular era, and a call for eradication of any such powers which aim to destroy the race it was destined to salvage.

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